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A RETURN TO THE DAKOTA LAKE REGION

By FLORENCE MERRIAM BAILEY

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VI. THE COULEE OF THE MEADOWS

FROM the windmills on the distant horizon comes the Coulee, winding languidly down through the meadows till nearly losing itself in the green-veiled waterway under the grass-carpeted span of the Bridge over the Coulee; winding languidly on, narrowing in between grassy points and tule promontories, broadening out between retreating bench lines whose widely opposed faces tell of the greater waterways of the geologic past; winding on, curving gently around green pastures, offering shallow drinking places to thirsty cattle; meandering down, deepening in between narrow banks of high marsh vegetation, till it passes under the Bridge of the Grebes and the Ruddies, and beyond swerves out to lose itself in the lake. From the widely opposed faces of the retreating bench lines looking down on its greatest bend, a beautiful picture presents itself; the Coulee, lying open under the sky, between the vivid greens of its marshy borders and the soft straw colors of the wide wheat fields, its pellucid surface dotted over with resting water fowl.

Under a cloudless sky on a quiet day, it is easy to imagine, a trick of the sun would turn the peaceful waterway to a little river of blue. On a windy day riffled patches of ultramarine mark the current between brownish borders of water weeds that raise their heads to the surface—a surface tracked with the irregular cross lines of many feathered swimmers.

Meandering down between the broad Sweetwater lakes, which often roll with white caps, the placid Coulee, sheltered by a dense growth of marsh vegetation and in places by high protecting banks, offers safe harbor and unbroken quiet for families of tender young. For some weeks I was living near it, beside East Sweetwater, and the voices of young were always to be heard. The narrowest parts were veritable nurseries, alive with families of Ducks and Dab-chicks, and innumerable broods of Coots. I could get close to them in the pasture—that pasture of pleasant memories, where friendly horses came for a wisp of grass or a pat on the neck, or contentedly stood around while busy Cowbirds walked unafraid about them; where, too, the belated Norwegian milk-maid and I, going to bring the cattle home by the light of the moon, mistook the dim forms of horses for cows, and in our search had to follow faint trails now east now west; the milk-maid's weird Norwegian call, urgent and commanding, penetrating far into the dusky distances. In the pasture, too, when I was trying to watch Ducks from the umbrella blind some distant passersby mistook it for "some kind of an animal"; though, when the prairie wind made it so ineffect-ive that I took it down, they recognized it for "some kind of a tent"!

Cow paths followed the outlines of fingers of marsh the Coulee laid on the pasture, and led on behind a border of cat-tails where, mixed with the quack of a Mallard and the voices of young, the rasp of a Coot made me peer down, and discover, to my amusement, a nervously veering white bill between the green stalks. Close by was one of the favorite feeding grounds of the Coots

and their families, a length of Coulee green with water plants. The adults ran through them freely, splashing up the water, but two half grown young which, on my approach, rushed out of a cane border had to waddle through the thick surface weeds, while their anxious parent on the opposite bank turned from side to side calling *ep, ep*, in worried tones as she watched their slow progress.

A much smaller, red-headed chick, looking as if just out of the nest, followed its—father, let us say—slowly and elaborately through the green mass. How could it plow its way through? Did it follow where he had parted the weeds? As it fell behind, he kept calling encouragingly, *ek-ek-ek-ek-ek* and waited for it. When the little tot caught up to him it was so hungry that, between feedings, it weakly fluttered its tiny finny wings, begging him to hurry. The—mother, let us say—was a short distance back down the Coulee with several young in her charge. Three, there seemed to be at first, but more kept coming out of the cat-tails until there were seven Redheads in all. One of these, however, evidently belonged to other parents, for although I could not imagine how any Coots could tell each other apart, it left the six that had joined their mother and swam back down the Coulee loudly calling for its own parents. When the six had been seen by the father with his one, he swam back toward them, and the mother seeing them coming left the six, and swimming up to the one little one which had been following its father, was apparently so glad to see it that she just had to feed it herself—several times—before she could let it go.

Why should one parent have so many more young to care for than the other, I asked myself. Does the mother naturally take the greater responsibility for the young? Or, is one parent a more capable and therefore popular provider than the other? Or is it after all just a matter of chance following? A bit of evidence was supplied at the juncture. A second Redhead came up and joined its father and the one brother; but, as if realizing that it had made a mistake, stayed only a few moments, quickly swimming back to its mother and her five. There surely was no chance about that. Perhaps in this case, though, the little fellow wanted to be with his brothers. Who can say? Another bit of testimony was stumbled on, one day, when three hairy young were being cared for by one parent, though she was devoting herself exclusively to one of them at the moment. Presently the other parent swam up and, singular as it looked, he too proceeded to feed that one chick. Though it was probably the hungry one of the brood—trust parents to know—it certainly did seem unnecessary for such a scrap to be fed by two. Each time the old ones elaborately swam away from it in opposite directions, picked up food, and swam back to it. Before long, however, the little fellow who was in such apparent danger of over-feeding swam off to the visiting parent and the two went away together. In this case also, the young deliberately (?) changed from one parent to the other.

When watching the still more unequally divided family, that of five and one, I had just made a note of the fact that the adults were getting food from the surface or close below—not diving—when the mother as if to testify to the danger of generalizations from insufficient data, began to dive. Four times a minute was the fastest that I counted, but besides giving the food to the young, she took time to shake her wings and pick around from the surface. A parent whom I found in another part of the Coulee had four Redheads with her but only one hungry enough to stay close by, so she fed him exclusively and rapidly, diving and feeding, diving and feeding, in a very business-like way. I did

not time the diving then, but later, when she seemed to be feeding much more slowly, she dived and fed five times in a minute. She often dived with a splash that sent the ripples circling out, so that when she came up she fed the little one inside the rings. Generally the mother swam over or handed the food to the little one, but sometimes he reached out to take it for himself. While this Coot, on the opposite side of the Coulee from me, procured food mainly by diving, a parent in the thick water plants on my side of the Coulee fed exclusively, so far as I observed, from the surface plants; and as I found both parents and young in the same places doing the same things at different visits, I inferred that each adult had its favorite method and feeding ground. Out in the clear water of the middle of the Coulee, one day, I found two old Coots a few feet apart, diving and feeding hairy young, one a single one, the other, two.

The value of the conspicuously colored heads of these nestling chicks was demonstrated when a family was being fed in the dark shade of the cat-tails; for I, at least, could never have differentiated them from their shadows. When the nestling plumage is lost, the young are better able to fend for themselves, besides which they talk so much that it would be hard indeed for their parents to lose track of them. A half grown, gray-headed youngster, crossing the Coulee, one day, seemed to keep its bill set open, giving vent to incessant weak cries. Its parent, following a short distance behind acted as if the iteration got on its nerves, swimming at the loquacious one with such an exasperated threatening manner that it dived to get out of the way. In this Coulee nursery, the Coots were so generally seen doing something strenuous, forging ahead with curved neck outstretched expectantly, or rapidly diving and feeding young, that it was a pleasure to see one standing at rest, round and gray in a green cat-tail doorway, looking motherly and comfortable.

The voices of young Coots and Pied-billed Grebes were those most commonly heard along the Coulee. One of the striped necked Pied-bills that I happened on was revolving around its parent's bill, teasing in infantile tones; but the hard-hearted parent continued to plume her feathers as if unconscious of its presence. Two other young Pied-bills made a pretty picture sitting side by side on the water between the foot of a cluster of cat-tails and its reflection.

After a little they followed their parent into the green labyrinth, coming out into a cat-tail cove where they sat apparently enjoying the sun, as well they might, for although it was August 11 by the calendar, my fingers became cold writing down notes. A Pied-bill to which I came too close fidgeted so nervously that a self-possessed Ruddy Duck, sitting on the water behind it watched it scornfully—if one dare judge by attitudes—and finally made a rush at it for its foolishness, at which it disappeared below.

Ruddies dominated one section of the narrow part of the Coulee. Quite a little fleet went swimming by one day—eight downy young with dark crowns and dark lines through the eye, five adult drakes, and three ducks. Much to my surprise some of the blue-billed drakes were going through the curious antics that had marked the June season of courtship, and although this was August, the rattle of their castanets was often heard. Once I saw two drakes facing each other, going through their ludicrous performances. Another time when a peaceable looking neighbor Ruddy was sitting quietly on the water doing nothing to provoke him, a belligerent drake went through the whole role—did chin exercise, his haughtily arched head and forward pointing spike tail almost meeting, ruffled up the feathers of his back, pressed down his tail and made an excited rush through the water at the onlooker.

When the females or young were in sight one of the cocky drakes would often bridle, strike an attitude, and shake his castanets. And to my great amusement, an absurd downy duckling, in a brood of eight that swam by with their mother, swam with his spike tail up and made motions that suggested the chin exercises of his paternal parent! A blue-billed drake that I fondly imagined was that parent, stood watching the downy procession pass, looking as if he would burst with pride! Later I saw a number of these youngsters assuming the airs of their forbears. And late in August when I happened to cross the Belgrade Bridge just as the mother Ruddy passed below with her small brood, strange to say, she herself drew in her chin in the veritable manner of her little lord.

While Coots and Dabchicks and Ruddies seemed to make up the larger part of the population of the Coulee, there was a variety of families enjoying the safe harbor. Under the cat-tail wall of the nursery, one day, a family of pretty little ducklings was huddled close together with heads tucked down in their feathers, taking a noonday nap; while just inside the first row of cat-tails, their mother, whom I took for a Pintail, was sitting on a platform resting, but through her green screen keeping a watchful eye upon her sleeping brood. Seeing me, she rose to her feet and turned to face me for closer scrutiny, but discovering nothing alarming let her little ones sleep in peace. Another brood, preceding their mother, swam just inside a cat-tail screen whose stalks were vivified by the sun, their file crossing the shadowy open spaces like the ghosts of Macbeth's dream. In another place a motherly Shoveller swam along trailing seventeen young. They appeared to be in two broods of slightly different sizes but I could not be sure enough of that to safely draw inferences concerning foster parents. A Duck with white at the base of her bill was doubtless a female Scaup, but no young were in evidence. Families of well grown Canvas-backs were seen out in the open at various points, up and down the Coulee. In one place they were riding out on the riffled purple water while lines of young Coots were keeping close under the quiet marsh grass border.

One day when absorbed in watching the ever shifting life of the Coulee I glanced up to find a big brown butterfly fluttering high over the water, the strong sunshine making it a joyous red against the blue sky. Another smaller brown butterfly with a subterminal band of red was seen and exquisite velvety red dragon flies with big eyes and bent legs were also greeted with enthusiasm; the pleasure of the sight in each case showing how little keen color there was in the landscapes of yellow grain fields and blue sky.

Although the most popular nursery of the Coulee was in the narrowest part bordering the pasture, where Marsh Wrens sang in the cat-tails and one heard occasional snatches of belated song from the Sora in the marsh and the Western Meadowlark in the pasture, there was much of interest in the wider parts of the Coulee beyond. From the top of the bench commanding the big bend one could look west down the narrow channel, and north up the broad north and south section of the Coulee. It was from this point of vantage that, on several different days, I watched one parent Coot on the bank opposite me diving and feeding its red-headed young inside ripple rings, and in the bend on the weed-covered surface of the sluggish water, saw the other parent feeding regularly from the surface.

One of the first birds I saw from the crest of the bank was a little brown Hooded Merganser, sitting low on the weedy surface. It was a Duck I had

never seen near by and had been watching for all summer, so I looked keenly at its flat, narrow, fisherman's bill, its knob-like suggestion of a crest, its upturned tail, and the light line along its side. Would that I could have seen an adult male with his spectacular black and white wheel crest! This one, as quiet as it was inconspicuous, failed to do anything notable, and soon passed out of sight. Was it merely a wanderer?

Another day, as I looked down, some Pied-bills and a close group of Shovellers were feeding below me. One of the Pied-bills, after diving came up right in the midst of the group of Shovellers, startling one so that it gave a quick jump back. The water weeds were so close below the surface here that the Ducks fed without tipping up, merely putting their heads under water.

Some stones on the shore were favorite resting places of the Canvasbacks and other large Ducks, which, sitting on them, looked very round and comfortable. One of the Canvasbacks on the water near by, all unconscious of observers, preened itself, scratched its ear with a webbed foot, and tossed up a swallow of water. The old females rode with matronly dignity, head held high, and bill often tilted up a little as if watching the bank above. A warning guttural note from a motherly old one who had come swimming up with a grown son, called my attention to the fact that I was being closely observed, and as I looked, the responsible parent flew, low over the water, away up around the bend beyond recognition. Her independent son, however, did not think it necessary to follow, and later, apparently went back to his brothers down the Coulee.

Twice I saw below me what must have been an Eared Grebe, either a young one or an adult in fall plumage. It sat solitary as they so often do, turning its head to look at me, its pointed crest and white throat reflected beneath it. When a young Coot came along, the exquisitely modelled throat of the Grebe made the poor heavily-built Coot suddenly fall in the scale of beauty. A black tug boat beside a white-rigged sail boat naturally suffers. But the tug boat nevertheless has its assured place in the world!

Standing on the crest of the bank with my back to the water, one day, I was conscious of some large bird flying away with a low grunting noise, and turning discovered a brown Bittern crossing the stream, evidently having risen from the tules on the edge of the water below me, for it let itself down into the marshy border of the opposite bank. Silent, mysterious birds, how the knowledge of their presence enriched the banks of the Coulee!

But this little river was not merely the resort of those living along its banks. Swallows were often seen flying over it and it was frequently visited by passing water fowl. Flocks of Ducks, Black Tern, and Snipe often whirled by, the Snipe with their perfect team work giving a charming flash of white. Late one afternoon a flock of thirty or forty Black Tern trooped in, black-headed adults and parti-colored young. Along the wire fence leading down into the lake arose a confusion of fluttering wings and tongues, the voluble young trying to get seated, talking in hoarse over-strained voices, as if they had been at it since early dawn—as they doubtless had. The flock was in constant motion. Sometimes a large band would sweep down and pass beyond on long gray wings, the young, retreating white spindles; then all would come trooping back, talking sociably as they came, skimming over the water like Swallows. The most skillful would dip down daintily in passing, while others—both old and young—would halt and light on the water a moment to pick up what, it would

seem, they were not quite Swallow-like enough to get on the wing. After flying back and forth over the surface for some time, the gray-winged flock took a turn in the sky; then suddenly, with one accord they swept down, fairly dropped down, to the water. When finally leaving they made a charming picture, the whole band of gray wings trooping up toward the sunpath.

While the Black Terns had been going through their evolutions, they had been watched by a group of Canvasbacks and other large Ducks which lay at ease on the water, phlegmatic Ducks to whom the performances of the nervous aeronauts must have been as edifying as the evolutions of aeroplanes to earth-bound multitudes. Besides the Terns, Franklin Gulls also flew down the Coulee—once, from high in the sky they swept down low over it—and one night on their way to the lake, a large mixed flock of Franklin Gulls and Black Terns made the sky over the pasture a moving picture of weaving wings. The next morning a flock of the Terns was beating low over a strip of plowed ground back of the Coulee, dropping down to pick up insects as they had over the water. Another time a party of Franklin Gulls was sitting near together, part of them bathing in the Coulee.

When sitting on the highest bench overlooking the big bend, one morning, I was idly watching the six or eight horse reapers and binders of the surrounding acres—one farmer was harvesting with three of the great machines, having borrowed one of a neighbor!—and before my eyes level-topped grain fields were changing to stubble fields dotted with sheaves of wheat, when suddenly a loud splash below brought me to my feet on the edge of the bank. In a line leading from the water to the bank, the tules shook and bent down—some one was coming! Peering down where the approaching bird or beast must show through the marsh grass, I discovered the striped nose of a large badger! As he started to climb up the hill I bethought me of the great hole in the grass at my feet, and in a moment more, up came the badger, swinging down his burrow like a flash, so near I could almost have touched him. Growling and sounds of digging then came up from the cavern. Was the hole being enlarged in view of the enemy on the rampart above? When the noise had stopped and I was leaving, I leaned over and peered down into the burrow again, and back in the shadow of the doorway saw dimly what seemed to be a large light-colored head—so it was a case of the watcher watched!

Two days later I heard a snarl from the badger below, but that was all. His cave had been well located, in a strip of prairie left between the wheat fields and the Coulee, a strip in which sagebrush and a patch of silver leaf made a last stand against the advance of civilization; and in which let us hope he might well be left undisturbed to carry on his good work of ridding the fields of destructive rodents.

Following this strip of prairie around a bend of the Coulee one day, I came upon a mound of soft earth a yard or more across, marked with footprints and having a hole so large that it proclaimed badgers. At the same time I began to hear queer animal noises, and the Redwings in the tules on the edge of the Coulee began fussing. Then the grass tops next the tules began to shake, and the shaking passed up a line toward me until at last I saw white-tipped hairs. By this time the noises from two approaching combatants were so angry and threatening, with snappy barks and snarls, that I stepped a little to one side. On their way toward me one of the belligerents caught sight of me and ran off in the grass, but the other one climbed up on a second mound and

raised his head like a dog, showing his broad striped face. On discovering me he apparently ran down his burrow, but angry mutterings plainly told that it took some time for these hardy antagonists to cool down. Woe be to the small ground squirrels they hunt!

A fourth badger was seen by the pasture fence. On a pile of soft brown earth the large brownish white animal was industriously digging. As if failing to find his quarry, he backed out and went trotting down the cow path, his short tail up like a bulldog. Going under the fence he turned into the weeds and then, discovering me, stood looking at me through his screen of weeds, his white nose stripe, flat ears, and white face marks showing well. When satisfied with his scrutiny he turned down a hole, growling as the others had. Numbers of large burrows in the neighborhood proved the industry of the badgers and the absence of ground squirrels attested the effectiveness of their labors.

The strip of prairie where I had found the Coulee badgers, extending along the east bank between the marshy edge of the water and the wheat fields of the terrace above, in late August made a golden band of prairie flowers. The sturdy yellow Grindelia with its gummy flower heads—beneficent cure for poison ivy—golden rod, the autumn flower of the east, and a wild sunflower that looked up the slopes facing the morning sun, dominated the wild garden strip, but a touch of purple was added to the gold in a magenta spike, the blazing star, whose flowers suggest the fragrant white spirals of ladies' tresses.

Following the bench north to its highest crest I looked up the sinuous line of the Coulee and out north-east a mile away to the second Coulee Bridge, whose black iron frame stood high above the meadows. But the best view was from my old lookout on Badger Crest. With a strong wind from the northwest, the Coulee made a beautiful water color. Down its narrowing westerly course, soft browns and wind ruffled dark purple patches were brightened by the vivid green of the marsh grass; while to the north, beyond the protected bend, still soft blues and browns led the eye along its widened shores. Open under the blue sky lay the Coulee, the prairie wind blowing over it, blowing till its tall marsh grass and its brown-topped tules bowed to the east, while the white-rumped Marsh Hawk hunted with hesitating flight up their borders.

(To be continued)